

VZCZCXRO9496
PP RUEH DU RUEHJO
DE RUEHSA #2507/01 3411508
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 071508Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0493
INFO RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 7406
RUEH DU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 1474
RUEHJO/AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG 9761

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 002507

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/03/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KGHG](#) [AF](#) [WI](#) [ZI](#) [IR](#) [SF](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR GIPS MEETS WITH DIRCO DEPMIN EBRAHIM

REF: A. STATE 122234
[1](#)B. STATE 123222

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On December 3, Ambassador Gips met with Ebrahim Ebrahim, Deputy Minister of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). Ebrahim cordially listed points on which the SAG was content with its relations with the U.S., he cited areas for collaboration in resolving African conflicts, and he appealed for U.S. re-engagement on the status of Western Sahara. On Afghanistan, where he argued that resolution must come through political dialogue, the SAG was willing to lend its good offices and share its experiences in peaceful transition. The SAG supported U.S. initiatives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it was unimpressed by the Israeli "moratorium" on settlements in lieu of a more definitive freeze. On Iran, Ebrahim urged the U.S. to pursue bilateral talks, to engage instead of isolate Iran, and thereby strengthen more Western-leaning elements over anti-Western extremists. End Summary.

SAG Content with USG Relations

[1](#)2. (C) After the Ambassador conveyed the USG's very strong commitment to its relationship with South Africa, Ebrahim expressed appreciation on a number of counts. He thanked the U.S. for being the largest foreign donor on HIV/AIDS, and he was aware of the Ambassador's November 30 announcement of an additional US\$120 million to help purchase ARVs. He was glad of President Obama's focus on Africa, as articulated at Accra. Approving of Secretary Clinton's proposal that bilateral consultations be elevated to ministerial level, he said the SAG was working toward that goal. Overall, he said, DIRCO was "pleased and happy" in its relations with the U.S., whose citizens were now its second largest pool of tourists. South Africa was now a lead beneficiary of AGOA and would like to see more African countries follow suit. (The Ambassador agreed, saying the U.S. would like to help overcome infrastructure hurdles to intra-African trade.) Ebrahim rounded off by hoping that President Obama would soon visit South Africa.

Africa: "Areas to Work Together"

[1](#)3. (C) With this segue to the President's agenda, the Ambassador explained that President Obama was ambitious for rapid progress across many foreign policy fronts, and that the Embassy would always be eager to talk with DIRCO to explain and consult on our approaches. The two countries'

objectives were usually the same, he argued, with only occasional disagreements on tactics. If the SAG would share insights with the U.S., and enable us to align our actions, the USG and SAG could be powerful together. Ebrahim said there were many areas where we could work together, especially in conflict resolution, particularly in the Horn of Africa and Sudan. He spoke of Zimbabwe as "making progress" although there were problems, especially on the Zanu-PF side. The SAG remained heavily involved, aware that "we have to make a big push there." He said he had not yet received a readout from the SAG's new facilitation team, which had just returned from Harare.

¶4. (C) Ebrahim was most emphatic in his concern over Western Sahara, which he saw as a "last vestige of colonialism" under an unjust occupation. Having visited refugee camps there, he feared that heretofore "secular" refugees could easily fall prey to radicalizing influences. As elsewhere around the world, the camps there were "an example of our reluctance to deal with these issues quickly, letting them fester, (and) creating an ideal situation for extremists." The U.S. had been engaged some years ago, inter alia through the Baker Plan, but since 9/11 had been diverted by its desire to work with Morocco on anti-terrorism issues, he said. In the Obama administration there had been no apparent movement toward a re-involvement with the Western Sahara. The Ambassador promised to convey to Washington South Africa's appeal for re-engagement on the issue.

Af-Pak, Mideast: SA Offers to Foster Dialogue

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¶5. (C) On global conflicts, Ebrahim said President Obama rightly saw the Israeli-Palestinian issue in its regional context. Afghanistan, he said, was problematic in relying on conventional forces to fight an insurgency. He hoped the troop surge (announced this week) could succeed. As in any conflict, however, the solution would be political dialogue not military victory, and he referenced the President's comments regarding outreach to moderate Taliban. The SAG, and the ruling ANC party, had shared its post-apartheid experiences in peaceful transition and reconciliation in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Ireland, and DIRCO was "prepared to assist" again. South Africa, said Ebrahim, had a standing in the world to undertake this role, without a hidden agenda. In Finland, the SAG had arranged talks among Iraqi Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish factions -- and it would be willing to serve an analogous role, discreetly, for Afghan dialogue outside Afghanistan.

¶6. (C) Ebrahim lamented that President Obama's initiatives toward Israel and Palestine had "stalled a bit," and he did not share the optimism of some U.S. visitors. The SAG was disappointed that Israelis were continuing to build settlements. Taking the Ambassador's point that Israeli had announced a "moratorium" on settlements, Ebrahim said what the SAG wanted was not that, but rather a definitive "end" to them altogether. In another example of fostering dialogue, the SAG had hosted Israeli and Palestinian delegates for a dialogue in South Africa and had provided "capacity building" to the Fatah party. Unfortunately, for these adversaries the exercise did not seem to bear fruit.

Iran: U.S. Should Engage (not Isolate)

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked for DIRCO's assessment of Iran's nuclear intentions, and recommendations for U.S. action. Ebrahim said the SAG had established binational commissions with Iran (as with the U.S. and China), and during recent consultations there Iran had assured him of their purely

peaceful intentions. (Note: Ebrahim led the SAG delegation. End Note.) He chided Canada for being "stuck" on censuring Iran at the U.N., which "creates problems for us." Urging the U.S. to meet with Iran alone, i.e. without any EU allies, Ebrahim suggested "This is what Iran wants... You will get more that way than by sanctions." Although the SAG had expressed "great concern" to Iran over post-election repression, it still felt Iran could play a critical role in the Mideast, Iraq, and even Afghanistan. Iranian society was divided, with the younger generation leaning westward. While "axis of evil" rhetoric united Iran against the U.S., talks would instead isolate the fundamentalist elements, he argued.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador affirmed that President Obama had made multiple attempts to engage Iran, but each attempt had been rebuffed. The President had repeatedly extended the olive branch to Iran, and despite domestic political heat from opposition voices in the U.S. he remained committed to the goal of dialogue, but he was frustrated to have had no positive response from Iran. In IAEA talks, similarly, the U.S. had thought it was close to striking a deal with Iran, only to be ultimately disappointed. The Ambassador urged the SAG, when next speaking with its Iranian counterparts, to convey that the Iranians needed to react more positively to U.S. outreach if real dialogue was to be achieved. President QU.S. outreach if real dialogue was to be achieved. President Obama continued to seek ways to enable communication.

Climate Change: U.S. Views Conveyed

¶9. (C) The Ambassador shared Department perspectives on climate change, emphasizing U.S. recognition of the challenge to developing countries. He relayed President Zuma's comment to him appreciating how far President Obama's own vision had developed and progressed on this issue. Ebrahim commented that South Africa would also participate at the summit in Copenhagen and hoped for a positive result there.

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Ebrahim Speaks Softly, but Carries Great Weight
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¶10. (C) COMMENT: Deputy Minister Ebrahim is considered President Jacob Zuma's closest advisor on foreign policy, reputedly wielding great influence behind the scenes in Zuma's inner circle, alongside his overt role in international outreach. As Chair of the ANC's International Relations Committee, he (not Minister Nkoana-Mashabane) leads foreign policy discussions within the party. He is said to

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weigh in personally and decisively on key issues, lately including votes at the U.N. An older man, whom an Embassy staffer described as a "wise owl" saying little but observing much, Ebrahim is not to be underestimated. Although in this opening meeting he remained on the level of pleasantries and generalities, we will work to deepen our relationship with this unassuming but pivotal SAG insider. End Comment.
GIPS